PROPOSED ACTION STATEMENT

06/08/2009

Bly Ranger District
Fremont-Winema National Forests
Klamath County, Oregon

Project Name: **BLACK HILLS PROJECT**
Responsible Official: **Allan Hahn, Acting Bly District Ranger, 541-353-2701**
Contact Person: **Jody Perozzi, Acting Southeast Zone Planning Staff, 541-353-2723**

Introduction

The Bly Ranger District is proposing a suite of comprehensive vegetation management actions and other activities within the Sycan River, Snake River and a small portion of Marsh Reservoir Subwatersheds of the Lower Sycan Watershed located within the Forest boundary in the Black Hills just north of Beatty, Oregon (refer to map). The project is being developed to implement the recommendations contained in the Lower Sycan Watershed Analysis (USDA Forest Service 2005).

The Black Hills Project planning area encompasses approximately 29,657 acres. About 28,537 acres are National Forest System (NFS) lands managed by the USDA Forest Service, with the remaining 1,120 acres being privately owned. The project is located in and around T34S, R12E, W.M. surveyed, Klamath County, Oregon.

The project planning area is of specific interest to the Klamath Tribes because it is within former Tribal Reservation lands.

Of the 28,537 NFS acres, 24,381(85%) acres are forested, 4,137(14%) are non- forested, and about 19(1%) acres are unclassified. About 14,355 are ponderosa pine (PP), 7,759 are mixed conifer/pine associated (PA), and 2,267 are lodgepole pine (LP) vegetation type.

<table>
<tr><th colspan="4">NATIONAL FOREST SYSTEM LANDS</th><th rowspan="2">PRIVATE</th><th rowspan="2">TOTAL ACRES</th></tr>
<tr><th rowspan="5">FORESTED</th><th>VEG TYPE</th><th>AC</th><th>% OF TOTAL FORESTED</th></tr>
<tr><td>PP</td><td>14,355</td><td>59</td><td rowspan="6"></td><td rowspan="6"></td></tr>
<tr><td>PA</td><td>7,759</td><td>32</td></tr>
<tr><td>LP</td><td>2,267</td><td>9</td></tr>
<tr><td>TOTAL FORESTED</td><td colspan="2">24,381</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">NON-FORESTED</td><td>4,137</td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="3">UNCLASSIFIED</td><td>19</td><td></td><td></td></tr>
<tr><td colspan="4">28,537</td><td>1,120</td><td>29,657</td></tr>
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Need for the Proposal

Current ponderosa pine stands in the Black Hills are overstocked and multi-storied, with no remaining examples of the historic open, fire-maintained stand conditions. These stands have more small trees, and fewer large trees than existed in the past, increasing the amount of ladder fuels. Current tree growth rates are slow, and stand vigor is declining as competition for water, nutrients, and growing space has increased as a result of higher tree density. The decreased growth rates and low level of tree and stand vigor makes trees more susceptible to insect attack and disease mortality, and makes trees less likely to survive a wildfire.

In each of the vegetation types described, fuels have accumulated from plant senescence and plant mortality. Dry climatic conditions and slow decomposition rates have resulted in large accumulations of burnable materials. Brush species have become thick and decadent, with a large component of dead stems. The increasing decadence of shrubs is of concern because bitterbrush is the primary mule deer forage in the area, and the majority of bitterbrush is currently in a mature to overmature condition.

Vegetation in the Black Hills shrublands has increased in density, fuel loading, and tree encroachment. Ponderosa pine, lodgepole pine and western juniper trees have increased in range, currently occupying areas formerly dominated by sage, bitterbrush, and mountain mahogany.

The purposes of this project, consistent with the Fremont National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan direction, are to promote the overall sustainability of vegetative systems and hydrologic functioning within the project planning area. Specifically, the objectives for this project are to:

Enhance and restore ponderosa pine stands closer to historic conditions
Protect and enhance existing old growth/LOS stands
Reduce fuel levels and reintroduce fire on the landscape
Improve and enhance mule deer habitat
Revitalize Non-forested vegetation habitat
Maintain and restore aspen stands
Enhance riparian habitats
Reduce road densities
Provide forest products as a by-product of meeting the above objectives, including the removal of dead, dying and infested trees.

Project Description

About 16,300 acres would be thinned using variable density thinning from below via ground based harvesting methods, producing merchantable sawlog material (see potential ground based treatment area on map). This treatment would be followed by small tree thinning, with the cut material extracted as biomass products such as energy production or chip wood products. Some small tree thinning may be accomplished by chainsaw without any utilization. This is expected to yield 25-30 million board feet of utilizable wood products. A minimum of 5-15% of each unit would be left untreated to provide for diversity.

The project would include a forest plan amendment to allow harvest of white fir greater than 21 inches in diameter at breast height (dbh), where such thinning would help meet restoration objectives. Additionally, a forest plan amendment is proposed to treat designated old growth (Management Areas 3 and 14) stands in the project area to decrease basal area to improve stand health and resiliency.

It is anticipated that thinning would be accomplished by mechanized feller-buncher, grapple skidder operation with product manufacture on landings. Large landings, up to an acre in size, would be necessary to store small diameter material until it could be transported to either a biomass facility or mill. Whole tree yarding would effectively treat activity fuels or slash created by thinning operations.

Stands would be treated to achieve a structure and composition resembling historic conditions, leaving 30-120 square feet of basal area, favoring the survival of large ponderosa pine and sugar pine greater than 21 inches in dbh. Objectives are to emulate historical forest conditions where ponderosa pine was the stable keystone species and a crown fire will not readily occur, and insects and disease are at endemic levels of mortality. Lower densities will serve to reduce loss of late and old forest structures on a landscape level. Occasionally, large diameter trees will be removed for safety or operational needs.

Approximately 2,300 acres are proposed to be treated using helicopter logging methods. Projected volume is expected to yield between 4-5 million board feet of utilizable wood products. Stands that would be helicopter logged are those where the slope exceeds ground based equipments capability. The area of concern would be stands located on slopes greater than 30% on and around Spodue Mountain. An analysis will determine whether this activity is economically or physically feasible. Large landings, up to 3 acres in size, may be necessary. This proposed activity would include treatment of created slash by whole tree yarding, machine piling and burning, hand piling and burning, or a combination thereof. Helicopter yarding would not occur simply to remove merchantable timber.

Approximately 400 acres of small diameter trees would be treated using mechanical and/or underburning methods. Materials could be utilized commercially where markets exist (e.g., biomass fuel, small diameter logs).

The Spodue Evaluation Plantation's purpose has been accomplished and the plantation would be small tree thinned. The plantation would be selectively thinned into a seed production area and the old existing fence would be removed.

Thinning along the Sycan Wild and Scenic River is proposed, through a combination of small tree thinning by chainsaw and prescribed burning. Some hand piling may occur.

METHOD	ACRES	PROJECTED VOLUME
GROUND BASED HARVESTING	**16,300**	**25-30 MILLION BDFT**
SMALL TREE THINNING	**400**	**PENDING AVAILBLE MARKETS**
HELICOPTER LOGGING	**2,300**	**4-5 MILLION BDFT**

Encroaching conifers less than 21 inches dbh would be removed to increase the mountain mahogany component for deer and help rejuvenate aspen stands. Canopy closure would be reduced improving bitterbrush reproduction and vigor.

Harvestable acres would vary by soil capability, topography, cultural resources, or what the logging equipment is physically capable of.

Activity fuels (slash) would be treated by whole tree yarding and piling for disposal on landings. Pine and white fir stumps, except those in riparian habitat conservation areas (RHCA'S), would be treated with borax product to prevent the spread of root rot.

Existing large down wood and snags would be retained. Snags within the harvest units that pose a safety hazard (as defined in the *Field Guide for Danger Tree Identification and Response, 2008)* would be felled and retained on site as down wood if needed to meet down wood standards per the Forest Plan.

Prescribed fire treatment would be used in the ponderosa pine (PP) and mixed conifer/pine associated (PA) vegetation types. The existing road system would be utilized as control lines in conjunction with natural openings and features. Treatment would occur in strategic blocks over several years.

Other proposed activities would include: road maintenance/reconstruction, road closures and decommissioning as necessary or where opportunities exist based upon roads analysis, construction of temporary spur roads, and erosion control measures. Meadow enhancement activities may also be included. This may include mechanical or hand treatments and/or use of prescribed fire to restore meadow size and function. Actual locations and types of work will be dependant upon plant surveys, archeological surveys, and consideration of locally important areas.

Decision Framework

Given the need for the proposal and the issues raised during analysis, the responsible official, Fremont-Winema National Forests Supervisor, will review the Environmental Analysis to make the following decisions:

- Should the proposed action, an alternative action or a modified version of an action alternative be implemented, or should no action be taken at this time in the Black Hills Project area?

- Would the selected action have a significant impact upon the quality of the human environment and thus require development of an environmental impact statement (EIS)?

- Is the selected action consistent with the management direction of the Fremont National Forest Plan or is a site-specific Forest Plan amendment necessary?